

FRANK READE

WEEKLY MAGAZINE

Containing Stories of Adventures on Land, Sea & in the Air.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, 1902, by Frank Tousey.

No. 7.

28

NEW YORK, DECEMBER 12, 1902.

Price 5 Cents.

FRANK READE, JR.'S AIR WONDER THE "KITE;" OR, A SIX WEEKS' FLIGHT OVER THE ANDES. By "NONAME."



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Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1902, in the office of the Librarian of Congress,
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Frank Reade, Jr.'s Air Wonder, The "Kite";

OR,

A SIX WEEKS' FLIGHT OVER THE ANDES.

By "NONAME."

CHAPTER I.

A VILLAIN'S GREED.

It was near the close of a beautiful day in June, and the declining sun shed its radiance softly over the crags and heights of the Andes Mountains in the heart of Peru.

High up in the heart of the hills was a flat shelf of rock projecting from the cliff, and far out over an enormous descent of a thousand feet to depths below.

Upon the verge of this shelf of rock a fearful scene was being enacted.

Two men were there engaged in a fearful death struggle. Locked in each other's embrace, they fought and panted like veritable fiends.

They were both Americans. On their way over the great Southern Cordilleros they had a falling out, and a battle to the death was the result.

One was tall and supple, with powerful limbs and deep chest. The other was thin and slender, and rather sickly-looking, yet he fought with consummate skill and absolute fearlessness.

"Confound you, Royal Harding! You shall never live to reap the benefit of our discovery of the treasure cave of

the Incas. It is mine—all mine—and I shall return to New York and claim the heart and hand of beautiful Mabel Dane—not you."

"Never, Lester Vane! Your plans shall never win success. A great and just God will never permit it."

"Worm! I can crush you as I would a reed!"

"I shall fight to the last."

"Over the precipice with you!"

Fiercely they fought. The larger man, who was the first speaker, made a tremendous effort, and suddenly lifted the other like a feather.

One moment he hovered in mid-air, and then over the precipice he went.

A wild, awful cry of anguish and despair went up from the slight man. Down over the edge he went.

Out of sight he flashed. A yell of fiendish delight escaped the victor.

He rushed to the edge and looked over.

He had expected to see the mangled form of his victim at the bottom of the cliff.

But to his surprise he saw him suspended in mid-air fully a hundred feet below.

In his sliding descent he had managed to grasp a scrub of spruce which projected from the wall of the cliff.

To this he clung.

It was certainly a close call. His life was spared for the moment. But what more awful than his present position.

The white, awe-struck, upturned countenance met the gaze of Lester Vane.

"For mercy's sake, Lester, do not let me die. Save me!"

A mocking laugh pealed from the villain's lips.

In his hand there was a huge stone with which he had intended to dash his victim from his slender perch.

But second thought restrained him.

"I was about to dash you from that hold!" he hissed, "but that would be only a merciful ending of your agonies. I shall leave you to hang there until your strength gives out and you are obliged to fall of your own accord. May your thoughts be pleasant and your end a happy one."

"Villain!" groaned Harding with awful terror. "You do not mean that!"

"Don't I?"

"You cannot be so inhuman!"

"Ha! you do not know me. Stay there and think of me with the Incas treasure on my way to New York to claim Mabel Dane. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wretch! Monster!" screamed Harding in an insane manner. "You will never do that. No, no, no! I appeal to your sense of right and humanity. Be just!"

But his words were wasted, spent upon empty air.

Vane had disappeared, gliding away noiselessly among the mountain crags.

The stillness of death was upon the defile. Far above a solitary vulture wheeled in airy echelon as if waiting to feast upon a certain victim.

Awful horror was upon Harding.

He clung to the scrub with an energy born of despair.

He dared not cast his glance downward for fear he would relax his grip and fall.

Fearful thoughts coursed through his fevered brain.

Awful agonies he suffered in that moment, and the end seemed certain to be death. Several times the frenzy of despair nigh overcame him and he almost relaxed his grip and fall.

"Oh, God!" he moaned, "am I to die thus? Is this to be my fate?"

And yet what was to save him?

The region seemed utterly deserted. There seemed not the least chance of his rescue being effected, for there were probably no human beings other than himself and Vane within many miles of the place.

The story of the presence of the two men in these parts was a brief one.

They had met in Callao and fraternized. As it chance both were from New York.

Harding was in love with a young lady of good family in New York.

He carried Mabel Dane's picture with him, and in an unsuspecting moment showed it to Vane.

The latter, a fellow of fiery impulse, at once fell in love with the portrait, and instinctively became jealous of Harding.

In the blackness of his heart he was resolved to cut his friend out and win the girl whom he had never seen as his own.

Harding never suspected him.

He took a fancy to Vane and confided to him a valuable secret.

This was the supposed location of an Incas treasure far up in the Andes. Arrangements were quickly made, and the two men set out with the purpose of securing the treasure.

For weeks they wandered about through the wilds.

Then success crowned their efforts.

A cavern was found deep in the mountains in which golden images and plate were buried. The value of the buried treasure was enormous.

It made rich men of both of them.

It seemed as if life had opened up before them with new and glowing prospects. The delirium of the gold seeker was upon them.

But after a time this wore away in part, and practical questions began to assert themselves.

How were they to transport their wealth to civilization?

It certainly was of no use to them here. It was a problem which required some little study to solve.

"I will tell you," said Vane, finally. "Let us go to Quito and procure a pack train of mules. We can transport the treasure to some point on the coast, and there we may find a trading vessel on which we may embark for the United States."

"Your plan is to purchase the vessel?"

"Yes."

"Good," agreed Harding. "It shall be as you say. We will do that."

Thus the plan was made.

No doubt it would have been successful.

But Lester Vane had in his heart a dark and dreadful purpose. His selfish, covetous nature would not admit of a generous division of the treasure.

His whole soul was filled with the one purpose to appropriate the whole wealth to himself, and with it to return to New York and win the heart of Mabel Dane.

But to do this it was necessary to dispose of Harding.

He saw but one way to do this.

Lester Vane was cold, calculating and unscrupulous. He determined to murder his companion outright.

With his mind made up to do this, he suddenly halted standing near the brow of the precipice, and coolly informed him of the fact.

He believed that as he was much stronger he could easily overcome the weaker man.

Harding was horrified with the discovery that his companion was this kind of a man.

But he was not disposed to yield to such a fate without a struggle.

So he made a brave and a resolute fight, as the reader has seen.

But the villain triumphed, and we now see Royal Harding hanging vainly to the face of the precipice, with death in its most awful form yawning below him.

It did not seem as if any human power could save him.

Lester Vane was making his way with all haste to Quito. He would charter a vessel, have the treasure transported to the coast, and sail away to the United States.

As Harding thought of all this he groaned with awful horror and despair.

"Oh," he moaned; "is this to be my unkind fate? Will anything save me?"

Then he thought of Mabel Dane, and his eyes flashed.

"And he thinks he can win her heart!" he muttered, "but he will learn better when he meets her. Mabel is too sweet and true to ever play me false!"

Then he began desperately to consider every possible chance of escape.

The distance to the bottom of the gorge was frightful.

The fall would be sure to dash the life from his body.

There was no way of climbing down.

The descent was sheer and precipitous, and jagged rocks were below. Neither could he hope to retain his present position long.

The tax upon the scrub was a severe one, and it had already begun to yield.

At any moment it was apt to give way. An awful horror overcame Royal Harding.

"Oh," he wailed; "will the villain triumph in this manner? Am I to be thus consigned to death?"

It was the prayer of a despairing soul, and that it found speedy answer seemed an assured fact.

For suddenly Harding felt a shadow pass between him and the dying rays of the sun.

There was a peculiar whirring sound like the movement of many wings, and he looked up to behold a stunning spectacle.

A huge ship seemed floating in the air above him. There it was, hull and masts, and bowsprit, decks and all.

For a moment Harding thought it the effect of a disordered mind.

But he pulled himself together and gazed hard at the spectacle.

Then he saw beyond a doubt that it was truly an air-ship, and upon the bow he read in gilt letters:

"THE KITE,
"FRANK READE, JR."

A wild, thrilling cry went up from Royal Harding's lips. "Saved, saved!" he cried. "It is Frank Reade, Jr., the wonderful young inventor, and one of his air-ships. Saved, thank God!"

Harding had not been so long absent from the world of civilization that he had not heard of Frank Reade, Jr., and his wonderful inventions.

He had read the exploits of the young inventor and was well familiar with his history.

He knew that Frank Reade, Jr., was a young and handsome fellow of the rarest gifts, whose home was in a beautiful American city called Readestown.

Air-ships were the hobby of this famous young inventor, and he had taken many trips about the world, accompanied by two faithful servants, an Irishman named Barney O'Shea and a negro called Pomp.

These were now at the rail of the air-ship, and the Celt shouted:

"Howld fast, sor! Shure it's to your rescue we'll be afther coming!"

CHAPTER II.

THE WONDERFUL AIR-SHIP.

The joy of Harding bordered upon a frenzy. He could hardly contain himself.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "God has answered my prayer. I shall be saved."

"Av coorse yez will!" cried Barney, in an encouraging voice. "Shure an' howiver did yez come in this persition?"

"I was thrown over the cliff by a companion whom I supposed to be a friend, but who was my worst enemy."

"Shure that was a dhirty thrick. Niver mind, yez may yit git squar wid the omadhoun!"

"I will," replied Harding, resolutely.

The darky, Pomp, threw a rope over the rail.

"Golly, sah!" he cried, with a comical grin. "Jes' yo' each hol' ob dat an' dis chile brung yo' abo'd pooty quick!"

"Easy, Pomp," said a rich, melodious voice. "It is not quite time yet."

The speaker was Frank Reade, Jr., himself. He stood upon the deck with one hand upon the rail and an eye upon the revolving rotascopes which served to hold the ship suspended in the air.

He was a fine, handsome specimen of youth, with clear-cut features, a steady eye and an air of one born to command.

The Kite was settling down slowly into the defile.

Pomp now rushed to the pilot-house near and pressed one of the electric keys.

This so regulated the speed of the rotascopes that the air-ship was held immovable at its present attitude.

Then Pomp sprang back to the rail.

Barney had taken the rope and had now swung it over until it came within reach of Harding.

"Steady dar, boss!" cried Pomp. "Now jes' yo' hang right on!"

"All right, my good friends," replied Harding.

There was a noose in the end of the rope, and the gold seeker slipped this under his shoulders.

Then he cried:

"All right! Haul away!"

This was done. Pomp and Barney hauled away with a will, and very quickly Harding was lifted over the rail on board the Kite.

He stood upon his feet and gazed about him.

"Heaven be praised!" he gasped. "This is all like a strange dream. It does not seem at all a reality."

"I can understand that, sir," cried Frank Reade, Jr., with a pleasant laugh. "You are welcome on board the Kite."

He shook hands with Harding most warmly. But the gold seeker continued to gaze about the air-ship wonderingly.

"I have heard much of you and your inventions, Mr. Reade," he said, "but I never dreamed that your air-ship was such a beautiful and wonderful machine."

"Indeed," said Frank, pleasantly; "if you desire I will shortly show you about the ship and explain to you its details and manner of construction."

"Indeed, I shall be delighted."

"But you are fatigued. Come into the cabin and have a glass of wine, and tell us how you came in that dangerous position."

"I will do that with all pleasure," replied Harding.

He followed Frank Reade, Jr., into the cabin of the Kite.

This was situated amidships, and was a most beautifully furnished saloon.

Frank offered a chair to his visitor, and said:

"Now, Mr. Harding, we shall be very glad to have your story."

Harding had already given his name and business in these parts to Frank Reade, Jr.

He now began at the beginning and detailed the entire story of his life.

He told frankly of his love for Mabel Dane and of his expedition to Peru to search for the Incas treasure.

"I had hoped to find the fortune," he said, "and then return and claim the girl I love."

He then detailed his meeting with Vane and the after incidents.

How they had found the Incas treasure and had planned to remove it. Then the perfidy of Vane.

Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney and Pomp listened with the deepest of interest.

To them it was a most interesting and thrilling recital.

Particularly was the young inventor interested. When Harding had finished he cried, vehemently:

"My friend, you shall have your rights. That treasure every bit belongs to you, and yours it shall be."

"Thank you a thousand times!" cried Harding, eagerly. "Oh, do you really mean to say that you will help me to recover the Incas treasure?"

"I do," replied Frank.

"Half, yes, two-thirds of it shall be yours. I only ask enough——"

"Not one cent!" replied Frank, quickly. "I do not want money. I am rich enough."

Harding was almost delirious in his great joy.

He alternately thanked and blessed his young benefactor.

"If I can return to America with a fortune, and claim Mabel Dane as my wife," he declared, "I shall be the happiest man in the world."

"If it is in my power to assist you to do that, I will do it."

Frank now proceeded to show Harding the wonderful mechanism and construction of his air-ship.

"All the electrical devices aboard this ship," he declared, "are patents of my own."

The Kite was built after the shape of a modern cruiser, with a narrow hull, and long, pointed bow.

The hull was made of the lightest rolled platinum, lined on the bottom with tough steel meshes to resist a blow or the impact of a bullet.

Lightness and strength are the two prime things to be considered in building an air-ship.

Frank Reade, Jr., considered these well and carefully. He was certain that he had hit upon the right plan.

The hull of the Kite was roomy enough to admit of the storage of the electrical machinery, batteries and dynamos. Also there was a cabin for Barney and Pomp and a good-sized galley for cooking purposes.

A deck over all was made of light wood highly polished. Amidships was the cabin with furnishings and decorations of the richest description.

Forward was the pilot-house or tower, and aft was a similar tower for the regulating of the propeller or the rotascope shafts.

One huge mast rose from the deck and supported a monster rotascope, which was in itself sufficient to elevate the ship.

But to make sure, two smaller rotascopes were provided upon shafts which rose from the two towers.

In the stern was a large propeller like the huge screw of an ocean steamer.

From the mast and the bowsprit two flying jib sails were swung, for the purpose of steadying the Kite.

Altogether, the Kite was a most wonderful invention.

Harding was captivated by the plan as revealed by Frank Reade, Jr.

"It is wonderful," he declared. "You are certainly the most wonderful inventor on earth, Mr. Reade!"

"That may be a large statement," said the young inventor, with a smile. "However, I am glad that you appreciate my air-ship."

"I can only say that I am delighted beyond expression with the prospect of taking a voyage with you aboard the Kite," declared Harding, ardently. "It is a treat which any man would be glad to accept."

"The question now is," said Frank, brusquely, "what shall we do about the treasure you speak of? Would it not be best to secure that at once?"

"It will take Vane a long while to secure a transportation from Quito."

"True; but he may have decided to remove the treasure to some other hiding place!"

"Right!" cried Harding, nervously. "I appreciate the danger of procrastination, Mr. Reade. I am ready when you are."

"But you must first direct us where to find the treasure cave."

"That I will do, but——"

"What?"

"You cannot go thither with this air-ship."

"Why?"

"It is buried deep in a dark and unwholesome cavern. The air-ship cannot enter that."

"That is all right," said Frank. "We can leave the ship and return to it when we have secured the treasure."

"Certainly."

This move was decided upon at once.

Harding directed the course of the air-ship. Darkness was fast coming on, and after drifting for a time over the mountain peaks Frank decided that it would be better to wait for the light of another day.

Harding declared that the cavern was now not more than twenty miles distant.

"We will make that in very quick time in the morning," declared Frank. "Certainly we can do little in this gloom."

The sky was cloudy and the darkness which settled down was most intense.

But upon the bow of the air-ship was an electric search-light.

With this Frank illumined the face of the country below. He selected what he believed would be a good spot.

It was an open spot in a valley high up in the lofty Andes.

Here the air-ship was allowed to descend and rest upon the ground.

Pomp set about getting the evening meal.

The darky was a comical coon and could play the banjo and sing in genuine plantation style.

Barney, on the other hand, was a genuine type of the Hi-bernian, and was a master with the violin.

He could play all manner of Irish jigs and songs.

To get the two characters together, with their fund of music and comical jokes, was as good as a variety show.

While they were the warmest of friends, Barney and Pomp were always wrangling in a facetious way and playing jokes upon each other.

Upon the present night Barney had it in for Pomp.

The latter had put a live electric wire into the Celt's bed the night before, and when he retired had given him a shock which literally lifted him out of the bunk.

The Celt had sworn vengeance with a large V, and he proceeded to formulate a plan to get square with the darky.

When Barney played a joke upon any one it was generally a huge and unvarnished one, with hard knots all over it.

Now the Celt knew the weaknesses of the darky well.

If there is one thing in his world that the negro fears it is a disembodied spirit, or rather the thoughts of such.

Knowing this well, Barney chuckled to himself and proceeded to elaborate his little scheme.

Pomp was an unsuspecting party.

He busied himself about the evening meal and rendered up a repast which was delicious and appetizing.

Then, after the meal was over, all repaired to the deck to enjoy the balmy evening air.

Frank Reade, Jr., and Harding sat by the rail enjoying a social chat and some good cigars.

It was a fiendish plot which Barney had laid.

CHAPTER III.

BARNEY GETS SQUARE WITH POMP.

The Celt was firm in his purpose to give Pomp a soaking which he would not soon forget.

He was smarting himself from the effects of the experience with the live wire. His bones were yet sore.

"Begorra, I'll make the naygur wish he'd niver tackled me!" he declared. "Shure, I'll fix him neat."

Barney had procured from the chemical stores some phosphorus.

He procured a couple of sheets, and thoroughly treated them to a solution of this.

In the dark the sheets gave forth a luminous blue light, which was very like the sulphurous fires supposed to exist in Hades.

The Celt dressed himself up in these in the most ghostly fashion.

He had among his effects a hideous mask, which he whitened with a solution of common whitewash.

Then he placed plumpers in his cheeks to change the tone of his voice. He was now all ready for fun.

He chuckled as he surveyed himself in a glass.

"Be me sowl, I'll scare the loife out av that naygur!" he muttered, jubilantly. "He'll think fer shure that the divil has come fer him!"

Pomp was aft, engaged in polishing some brasswork on the binnacle lamp.

The light from the electric globe shone full upon his black visage as he worked away industriously and hummed a song at the same time.

Barney crept along in the gloom, and truly he was a sight well calculated to inspire terror.

The phosphoric gleam from his white garments was almost ghostly, and savoring of graveyards and ghouls.

Nearer he crept to the unsuspecting darky.

He was now directly behind him.

Pomp never dreamed of the ghostly visitor so near him.

Barney drew himself up and uttered a deep and dismal groan.

In a moment Pomp turned.

The effect was comical beyond all powers of description.

The darky let out a yell which might have awakened the dead, and dropped upon his knees.

"Massy sakes, golly fo' glory, sakes alibe!" he gasped. "Bress de Lor', sabe mah haht! de ghosteses hab come fo' Pomp fo' suah. Please, Mr. Ghosteses, don' harm dis chile, an' he do anyfing yo' say."

Barney waved his spectral arm and let out another groan.

Pomp doubled up and cried:

"Don' hurt dis po' brack chile, Mistah Ghosteses, ah beg ob yo'. I do anyfing yo' say if yo' don' hurt dis chile."

"Stand on yer head," said Barney, in a dismal voice.

In a twinkling Pomp obeyed.

"Walk on yer hands!"

This was done.

But Barney, the inexorable persecutor, was not yet satisfied.

Near by was a pail of salt water, which had been used in washing the deck. The pseudo ghost pointed to this.

"Drink!" he said.

Pomp hesitated.

"Drink!" thundered the specter.

"But, Mistah Ghosteses——"

"Drink, I say!" roared Barney.

He took a step forward. Pomp at once succumbed.

He took up the pail of water and took a mouthful. It was villainous stuff, and nigh choked him to death.

He dropped the pail and began to retch violently. The ghost took a step forward.

At once Pomp essayed a mouthful more.

"Please, Mistah Ghosteses, don' make me drink no moh ob dat stuff," he cried, beseechingly.

"Drink!" roared Barney.

"Mistah Ghosteses——"

For a moment Barney forgot his personality and said, in his rich brogue:

"Begorra, av yez don't dhrink the whole av it I'll break the neck av yez!"

The mask was off.

In an instant Pomp's fears were dispelled and he understood the whole game.

"Huh!" he yelled, straightening himself up. "I ain't afraid ob no 'count I'ish ghosteses, no way, you kin jes' bet! Look out dar!"

Lowering his head, Pomp made a dash for his persecutor.

Barney was not quick enough to get out of the way.

The darky's head struck him full in the stomach.

"Wow-ow-ough!" yelled Barney, with pain and anger.

"Be me sowl, yez have kilt me for shure!"

"I teach yo' to play such tricks on me, yo' no 'count I'sh-man!" yelled the darky, furiously making another rush.

Barney was not quick enough to get out of the way, and this time Pomp butted him clean over the rail of the air-ship.

The distance to the ground was not ten feet, and Barney was not hurt by the fall.

But the disclosure that the fall made was a startling one.

Barney felt some yielding form beneath him, and a sharp yell went up.

The Celt rolled over and was upon his feet instantly, but only in time to find himself surrounded by dark forms.

In the gloom he could not see who these were. But instinctively the thought of an enemy came to him.

"Whurroo!" he yelled, making a break through the throng. "Phwat the divil has broke loose? Get out av me way, yez omadhouns!"

Through the gang he broke, knocking them right and left. An angry series of yells went up, and the dark forms began to pile over the rail.

Frank Reade, Jr., had heard the racket, and sprang out upon deck.

At that moment Barney sprang over the rail, crying:

"Ochone, but the divils have attacked us, an' shure they'll be the death av the whole av us!"

Frank saw the dark forms coming over the rail.

Instinctively he knew what had happened. The situation was plain to him.

The mountains were infested with bands of Peruvian brigands, made up of half-breed natives and cut-throat Spaniards.

There was no doubt but that a gang of these had attacked the Kite.

Frank knew well what the result would be should they gain a footing on the deck.

There was no doubt but that the brigands would murder every one of the party and loot and burn the air-ship.

There was no time to hesitate.

The promptest of action must be made. Frank sprang to the searchlight and turned its glare full on the throng.

The effect was intense.

For a moment the brigands were blinded and stood gazing helplessly at the mighty glare of light.

In that moment Frank saw that they were types of the roughest men in creation, and that they were in great numbers.

It was a critical moment.

Certainly it looked as if the air-ship was doomed. If the brigands were not repulsed the effect would be terrible.

"On deck, all!" yelled Frank. "Stand ready for a fight!"

He could have rushed to the pilot-house and have sent the air-ship aloft in a moment.

But the brigands were now on deck in large numbers.

Pomp and Barney rushed into the cabin and came out with rifles. Harding also came with them.

"Give it to 'em!" shouted Frank. "Don't give them a chance to get the upper hand!"

"You bet we won't," cried Harding, with a thrill of resolution. "Mow them down, boys!"

The three rifles spoke.

The brigands were shot down like sheep. They returned the fire, but the defenders of the Kite were now all in the cabin and firing through loop-holes.

The destruction was most deadly.

The brigands tried to break in the cabin door. At this moment a happy thought came to Frank.

The Kite had been so constructed that its steel hull could be charged with electricity by pressing a certain key.

Those who were in the cabin, however, which was so arranged to be safe insulated territory, would not feel the shock.

Frank determined upon this method of repulsing the foe.

He saw quickly that it was going to be quite useless to attempt to defeat the brigands by means of rifles alone.

So he quickly connected the hull of the air-ship with the dynamos, and pressed the key which sent the electric current into it.

The result was a most unpleasant surprise to the brigands.

They were flung from the airship's deck as if propelled by giant hands. Broken bones and damaged heads were in order. Every brigand who ventured to touch the electrified air-ship was sorry the next moment.

This ended the battle.

The brigands withdrew into the darkness. They continued to fire ineffectual shots at the air-ship for some time.

But after awhile they withdrew.

This ended the affair for the time. The voyagers had reason to congratulate themselves that they had escaped so luckily.

"Begorra, I niver had a more narrow escape from instant death in me loife!" cried Barney. "Bechune you an' the brigands, naygur, I come mighty nigh croakin'."

"Youse jes' right dar, I'ish," returned Pomp, with flashing eyes. "An' dat jes' serves yo' right fo' yo' treatment of me!"

"Be jabbers, it's square we are for onet, yez black monkey."

"I done fink yo' don' want fo' to play no mo' ghosteses, I'ish!"

"Beggorra, it'll be wuss next time, naygur!"

"Well," said Frank, with conviction, "it's very fortunate indeed that Barney happened to tumble onto those chaps. If he had not, there is no doubt but that they would have given us a surprise."

"They are a cut-throat crew," declared Harding. "I was once held a prisoner by them for a week. I never suffered harsher treatment in my life."

As it was not likely that the brigands would return again that night, the position of the air-ship was not changed.

Until morning came, Barney and Pomp remained on guard.

The day dawned bright and clear, a typical day in the tropics.

The air-ship was soon again on its way.

For an hour and a half the air-ship kept on, until suddenly Harding drew Frank to the rail and pointed to a distant cut in the mountains.

"There is the cave," he said; "but the air-ship cannot go thither."

"All right," declared the young inventor; "we will leave it here."

Frank called to Barney and Pomp and said:

"You will stay aboard the ship and keep a sharp lookout until we return. Do you understand?"

"A'right, Marse Frank," replied Pomp.

"Yis, sor!" returned Barney.

Both were dying to accompany their young master upon the expedition.

But this of course was impossible, as somebody must be left aboard the air-ship.

The kite settled down now into a wide clearing. Here Frank intended to land.

Both himself and Harding were quickly ready and equipped for the expedition which was destined to acquaint them with some most thrilling adventures.

CHAPTER IV.

PRISONERS.

Harding was all excitement and eagerness. It did not seem as if he could get ready quick enough.

The air-ship rested upon the earth now, and Frank and Harding stepped over the rail.

As soon as the two explorers had gone, Barney and Pomp were to send the air-ship up a hundred feet or more and there safely anchor it.

A system of signals by means of rifle-shots had been agreed upon.

Thus having concluded all arrangements, the two explorers set out upon their trip.

Harding led the way.

They carried sacks in which the treasure was to be brought from the cavern to the air-ship.

Leaving the Kite they entered a dense clump of tropical growth, and a short while later came out into a narrow defile leading up through the hills.

This was deep and dangerous-looking.

The high walls rising so close together upon either side seemed to shut out the light of day.

The air-ship could not possibly have entered this narrow crack in the mountain wall, just as Harding had said.

"Ugh! This is indeed a most unwholesome place!" said Frank.

"As I told you," said Harding; "but it was once a gateway through the mountains."

"Indeed!"

"I believe it. You will notice the peculiar formation of the walls. An earthquake no doubt has brought about this peculiar state of affairs."

"You may be right," agreed Frank. "Ah, what wonderful things the world contains, which but few of its people are ever permitted to see."

"You are right there," agreed Harding, in a hearty manner.

"But I don't see how you ever found your way through here."

"Indeed, I was a long time in these parts before I was able to find it, though I had a plan of the spot, given me by a dying Incas chief. I finally succeeded."

The two explorers clambered on for hours over boulders and ledges of rock, stumps, and prickly cacti.

Poisonous snakes and reptiles were plenty in the place. It was with difficulty these were avoided.

But finally, after the hardest of work, they threaded the defile and came in sight of a deep-mouthed cavern.

"Found at last!" cried Harding, eagerly. "Now, Mr. Reade, prepare to feast your gaze upon a wonderful sight."

With feverish earnestness, the gold-seeker rushed forward.

Into the cavern they passed.

Suddenly Harding paused with a gasping cry.

"My God!" he exclaimed; "what is that?"

He pointed to some marks in the soft soil of the cavern floor.

They were footprints.

"Some one has been here, and lately!" he said, in a tense voice.

The two men exchanged glances.

"Yes," agreed Frank. "The footprints are proof."

"Who is it?"

"Perhaps it is Vane."

But Harding shook his head.

"No," he said. "I cannot believe that he has had time to get here yet. Moreover, those footprints are those of natives or brigands, and not of white men."

Frank saw that this was true.

"Upon my word, you are right," he declared. "What shall we do?"

"Go ahead and learn the worst."

Harding said this with set lips and white face.

Both started into the cavern.

A torch had been prepared, and this lit up the uncanny and somber gloom.

The air was foul and damp, and hundreds of huge bats flew out of the place as they went on.

Still they kept on.

After what seemed an interminable length of time, they entered a huge and high-arched cavern chamber.

Here a torch was out of the question, as a crevice in the roof admitted the light of day in abundance.

The chamber seemed to have been once used by the natives as a temple.

There were hieroglyphics upon the walls in great numbers, and the remains of a dais upon which a throne might have set were visible.

Harding advanced to the center of the chamber and knelt down.

He fumbled about in the dirt for a time, and then succeeded in resurrecting an iron ring.

Lifting this, he raised a square slab of stone.

A deep hole was revealed.

Harding glanced into it, and a cry of despair and anger escaped his lips.

It was empty.

"Gone!" he cried, wildly. "What devilish plot is this? They have stolen away my treasure! Curses on them!"

For a moment he seemed a literal madman.

Then gradually he calmed down.

"Have courage," said Frank, encouragingly; "we may overtake the thieves."

"Ah, I have no hopes of that!"

"Who do you believe them to be?"

"It is hard to say."

"Not Vane?"

"No; it must be that some prowling band of brigands has discovered the treasure. They may have seen us come here."

"In that event," said Frank, "we need only pursue them."

"They will fight."

"What of that?"

"There are only two of us!"

"But we can return to the air-ship. They cannot escape from the Kite."

Hope once more shown in Harding's face.

"There is cheer in your words, Mr. Reade," he said. "I will not despair yet. Let us go back to the Kite."

"All right."

But the words were hardly off Frank's lips when a startling thing occurred.

Suddenly from the cavern arches there came a mocking laugh.

Then the two adventurers were astounded to see dark forms flit from the shadows, and saw that they were surrounded by brigands.

For a moment Frank Reade, Jr., was at a loss how to act.

As for Harding, he was literally petrified with amazement and consternation.

Frank was the first to recover himself.

He swung his rifle over his shoulder and made a leap for the main passage, at the same time shouting:

"Quick, Harding! For your life!"

The gold seeker obeyed the injunction none too soon.

Both leaped into the shadows, and at that moment there came a report of a number of the brigands' rifles, and one of them shouted in Spanish:

"Hold, senors! You cannot escape! Surrender or you die!"

Frank saw that their case was a hopeless one.

Fortunately none of the bullets had struck them, but they had not gone far wide of the mark.

Harding's coat sleeve was shot full of holes, and Frank's hat was perforated.

The young inventor had thought to slip the foe in the main cavern.

But no sooner had he entered the passage than he found himself surrounded by the brigands.

There was no alternative but to surrender. Resistance was folly.

Frank saw this at a glance

He could have shot a few of the brigands and thus have

sold his life. But the thought flashed through his mind that this would be utter folly.

So he threw up his hands and cried in good Spanish

"Forbear, senors—we surrender!"

In a twinkling both were disarmed.

As they stood thus helpless in the center of the swarthy group of ruffians, the leader, a tall, powerful framed Peruvian, came forward.

He wore a broad sombrero, leathern breeches and fancifully beaded jacket.

A huge knife and a pair of revolvers were thrust into his belt.

With a swaggering braggadocio characteristic of the race, he advanced and said roughly in the Spanish language:

"Well, senors, this is the time that you are entrapped. It will not be easy for you to escape the vengeance of Red Muriel. Your people are all interlopers in this region, and our people hate you!"

"Indeed!" said Frank, calmly. "What harm have we done you?"

"Per Dios! That is not for me to answer. Your fate is sealed."

"Indeed!" said Harding, in the Spanish tongue. "Are we to die?"

"That is your fate."

"We are glad to know that," said Harding, coolly. "We are not afraid to die."

The brigand showed his teeth.

"Bravado!" he said, contemptuously.

"Cowardice, to kill two defenseless men!" retorted Harding.

The fellow's eyes gleamed.

"Spare your words, senor!" he said, coldly. "Nothing will save you!"

"One word more," exclaimed Harding, in a tense voice, pointing to the treasure vault. "Do you know what became of the gold that vault contained?"

The Spaniard smiled.

"Si, senor," he replied. "You would have stolen it. It is the property of myself."

"Liar!" cried Harding, furiously. "It was my property, and you have taken it away unlawfully!"

The brigand chief laughed in a scornful way.

"Words will avail you nothing, senor," he declared. "Prepare for death."

Both Harding and Frank saw that it was of no avail to bandy words with the brigand chief.

The latter turned and gave a gruff order to his men.

They advanced, and seizing the two prisoners by the arms, led them away.

Through the outer cavern passage they were led. Soon they were in daylight once more.

But this time they were in far different spirits than when they had entered the cave.

Despair most profound was upon Harding. But Frank Reade, Jr., was never the one to give way to such emotion.

The brigands led their prisoners through the defile, until suddenly they came to a path which led over the cliff.

Up this they went, and finally came out upon a sort of broad plateau terminating at this end of the defile.

Here, by Red Muriel's orders, the party came to a halt.

The brigand chief made a gesture and the prisoners were led almost to the brow of the cliff.

Then the villain advanced, and with a suave, mocking smile, said:

"Senors, please accept the congratulations of Red Muriel upon your speedy voyage to the next world. May you find a happier time there. Buenos, senors!"

With a sweeping bow the brigand chief retired.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Frank, "they mean to throw us to an awful death over the cliffs. That will be awful!"

CHAPTER V.

A DARING ESCAPE.

A cry of despair welled up from Harding's agonized bosom. He realized only too well the truth of Frank's words.

Death most awful confronted them.

There seemed no power at hand to save them. That the brigand chief would execute his threat there was no doubt.

Harding was not a coward, but he was the more disposed to yield to fate than Frank Reade, Jr.

The young inventor was constantly on the lookout for some way out of the dilemma. He quickly hit an idea.

"Harding!" he said, suddenly, in a hoarse whisper.

"Well?" retorted the other.

"Will you follow my directions?"

"What are they?"

"I have worked upon my bonds until I have loosened them. How are yours?"

"There is no show of their loosening."

"Ah, well, now let me tell you my plan. You have the use of your legs?"

"Yes; but my hands are tied."

"Well, never mind that. My hands will be free. Now if you will make a break to run toward that tree yonder it will

draw the attention of the brigands away from me, and I will make a dash for liberty. If I succeed in reaching that height yonder I shall be within view of the Kite and will signal Barney and Pomp. Then we will make a strike to save you. It is our only hope of salvation."

Harding saw the situation at a glance, and whispered back:

"All right! Give the word when you are ready!"

"I will do so."

Of course there was a chance that the scheme would fail, but it was certainly a dernier ressort.

Frank had now completely freed his hands. The brigand chief and his men were some yards away, evidently engaged in a discussion.

The moment had come.

There was not a little risk in the move. The brigands were apt to fire and shoot them both down.

But it was the only chance, as Frank had said, and well worth the trying.

Harding drew himself up, and as Frank gave the word he made a dash for the distant tree.

The ruse worked far better than either he or Frank had expected.

The brigands were so busily engaged in their discussion that they had not noticed the move until Harding had nearly reached the tree, and Frank was twice the distance in an opposite direction.

It had not seemed to occur to the brigands that the prisoners would dare to make a break for liberty.

Harding was more than elated with his success, and made up his mind to keep straight on.

"Caramba! Curses!" yelled the astounded brigand chief. "Chase them! Capture them at any cost! Shoot them!"

The brigands with yells started in pursuit. But Harding, despite the fact that his hands were tied, could run almost as fast as Frank, who had the use of his hands.

The bullets whistled about Harding.

But he kept on at full speed.

He had reached the tree and bounded on beyond it.

The brigands were coming in the rear, but Harding dashed down a steep incline and plunged into a thick jungle.

On the other hand, Frank Reade, Jr., had succeeded in reaching the high ground which was his objective point.

The Kite could from here be seen not two miles away rocking at her anchor.

The sound of the firing came up on the wind to Barney and Pomp.

"Begorra, av I'm not mistaken there's a bit av a ruction going on over there!" cried the Celt.

"Golly! dat am right, I reckon!" agreed Pomp. "Amn't dat de smoke of de guns yender?"

"Bejabers, let's take a luk at it."

Barney came from the cabin with a glass. He brought it to bear upon the smoke.

Then upon an eminence beyond he saw the form of a man making excited gestures.

There was no mistake.

Even at that distance Barney recognized his employer, Frank Reade, Jr.

"Be me sowl! av it ain't Misther Frank!" he cried. "Shure an' he's telegraphin' to us."

"Massy sakes alibe! dat am a fac'," cried Pomp. "We's done gwine to his help, sah, fo' suah!"

"Yez kin bet on that!" cried Barney, rushing to the anchor rope.

In a few moments the anchor was lifted. The Kite went sailing above the brigands, and Pomp dropped an electric bomb in their midst.

This fell with much force, and burst with a terrific explosion.

The effect was fearful. A great hole was blown in the ground, and several of the brigands were killed.

Terrified at the sight of the air-ship and at the deadly work of the bomb, the brigands desisted in their pursuit of Frank Reade, Jr.

The young inventor at a safe distance signaled the air-ship to descend.

Barney lost no time in making the descent, and as the air-ship touched the ground Frank sprang aboard.

Once more the air-ship rose with the young inventor safely aboard.

"Golly fo' glory, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp, excitedly. "I done fink yo' had jes' a narrow escape from being killed!"

"Well, I did," replied Frank. "But there is no time to lose. We must save Harding!"

But the brigands, it was quickly seen, had disappeared.

They had retreated into the defile, and evidently into the cavern.

Harding had gone from sight.

He was nowhere to be seen.

The last seen of him he had been making for the jungle.

The air-ship cruised around and over the vicinity for over an hour.

But Harding did not turn up, nor could a trace of him be found.

"Well," muttered Frank, in amazement, "that is mighty queer. What can it mean?"

After some time spent thus, a horrible fear seized the young inventor.

It was possible that Harding had been struck by one of the brigand's bullets, and was lying dead in some out-of-the-way place.

This decided Frank upon a different plan of action.

"Lower the ship, Barney!" he cried. "Be lively about it!"

"All roight, sor," replied Barney.

Down went the air-ship.

It rested upon the earth in the verge of the jungle. Frank seized his rifle and descended to the ground.

He lost no time in at once entering the jungle.

He found what he believed was Harding's trail. It led through the tall grasses, and in some soft mud he found the imprint of a boot-heel.

Some distance into the jungle Frank followed the trail.

Then he lost it.

He had been prepared for any horrible sight, even to seeing Harding's blood-stained body lying in the reeds.

But instead he made his way through a thick belt of grasses and came to higher land.

At this point the jungle was not one hundred yards from the brow of the defile which led to the cave.

Frank followed Harding's trail to this point. Then he saw where it terminated with a startled thrill.

Trailing vines and grasses covered the mouth of a deep pit.

Into this Harding had unwittingly stepped and sank to unknown depths, possibly to death.

For a moment Frank stood appalled.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "I fear that is the end of poor Harding!"

He bent down over the edge of the pit and tried to fathom its depths. But all was pitchy darkness.

Then he shouted loudly:

"Harding! I say, answer me if you are alive!"

But no answer came back. All was the stillness of death.

The hollow sound which was returned seemed to indicate that the pit was of great depth. How deep it was impossible to guess.

What was to be done?

Frank was in a quandary. There was no easy solution of the problem. Then he bethought himself of an idea.

He called to Pomp, who brought a rope and a lantern.

This later Frank lit and then lowered it into the pit. Down it went, and suddenly disappeared from sight.

The pit was winding, and the lantern could not be lowered so as to reveal its bottom to the one above.

Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney stood upon the edge of the pit after this discovery in a completely baffled state of mind.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" muttered Frank, impatiently: "this is a pretty state of affairs. What are we to do?"

"Golly, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp, readily, "if youse will jes' agree to it, I fin' a way to jes' brung Marse Harding up out ob dat!"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank. "What is it, Pomp?"

"Jes' yo' tie dat rope around mah waist, Marse Frank, an' I go down inter dat ar place. If I don' fin' Marse Harding den it will be becuse dis chile don' try."

"Good!" cried Frank, with alacrity. "There can be no harm in that, can there? And we may be able to rescue poor Harding."

"Begorra, naygur, will yez let me go in yer place?" asked Barney.

"I don' fink dat wud be jes' de fink," retorted Pomp. "I'se jes' doin' dis ar jab mahse'f, sah!"

Pomp quickly had the rope about him.

He slid boldly down into the winding passage, Barney and Frank holding on to the rope.

Down he went and out of sight.

Frank and Barney kept on paying out the rope for some while. Then suddenly Frank gave a sharp exclamation.

There was a thrill, and the rope suddenly felt slack. Frank gave it a lift. There was nothing on the end of it.

What did it mean?

There seemed only one solution. The two men looked at each other aghast.

"Be me sowl! that is very funny, sor!" cried Barney. "Phwativer wud yez call it, anyway?"

"Why, it looks as if Pomp had lost his hold and fallen from the rope."

This was certainly the outlook. But was it the truth?

There seemed no way of getting an answer to the question. Frank was speechless with surprise and uncertainty.

He wound the rope up and down for awhile, thinking that Pomp might have reached the bottom of the pit and had neglected to give the signal.

But no answer came.

It was evident that the darky had fallen from the rope in some peculiar fashion. Just how it was not easy to tell.

Frank began to pull on the rope.

In course of time the end came to the surface. Frank picked it up and quickly examined it.

The strands had parted just as if they had given way under a mighty strain. This seemed to settle all doubt.

There was no longer reason to doubt but that Pomp had fallen to the bottom of the pit and possibly death.

It was an awful thought.

Frank instantly began to wind the rope around his own waist.

"Phwere are yez goin', Misther Frank?" asked Barney, in amazement.

"I am going down to find Pomp," replied the young inventor.

CHAPTER VI.

FRANK'S SEARCH.

Barney gave a cry of alarm and disapproval.

"Shure, yez must niver do that!" he cried. "Your loife is too valuable fer that, Misther Reade. Let me go in your place."

The young inventor hesitated.

There was certainly logic in the remark of the Irishman's. It would seem like folly and certain death to descend into the pit upon the rope.

If it would part with the strain of Pomp's body it would certainly do so with his.

Frank saw this and realized the utter folly of such a move. Doubtless it was the chafing of the rope against the sharp ledges of rock which walled the passage which caused it to break.

So yielding to a better sense of discretion he abandoned the idea.

He was reluctant to do this, for it certainly looked as if it was the end of Harding and Pomp.

Frank was much distressed with the thought.

"My soul!" he ejaculated; "words cannot express how keenly I shall feel the loss of Pomp. He has been a good and faithful servant for many years."

"Shure, sor," exclaimed Barney, "ye don't mean ter give the naygur up?"

"Indeed, what else can we do?"

"To be shure, sor, it looks bad!"

"It looks desperate."

"But, sor, I'll not give up the naygur yet, sor."

"Ah, what plan have you?"

Barney scratched his head meditatively.

"Shure, sor, it's a heap av thinking I have been doin' and, sor, I makes up my mind that this pit is a cave."

"A cave?"

"Shure, sor."

Frank laughed quietly.

"Why, of course it is!" he declared. "What else could it be?"

"Well, sor," said Barney, confusedly, "that is—I would

say, sor, it is a cave, and what is more, it is loikely a part of the other cave, sor!"

Like a flash the Celt's meaning flashed upon Frank Reade, Jr.

It was certainly a bright thought.

"Good for you, Barney!" he declared. "I never thought of that. If it is true, which pray Heaven it is, our friends must be all safe."

"Very loikely, sor!" said Barney, confidently. "No, sor, I'll niver give up the hope that the naygur is aloive an' safe!"

"Good enough!" cried Frank. "Now let us look this matter up. But——"

Frank paused in disappointment.

"Phwat, sor?" asked Barney, pointedly.

"How can we do that?"

"An' phwy not, sor?"

"Somebody must stay with the air-ship."

Barney's face fell.

He had not thought of this.

"Shure, sor, the wan av us can go."

"That is true!" agreed Frank, "but it is an unfortunate splitting up of our numbers. Let me see. I think you had better stay with the Kite, Barney. Keep a good outlook for foes."

Barney nodded his head.

"All roight, sor!" he said. "Your worrud is law, sor. But the risk is very great for ye, Misther Frank. I think ye had bettther let me go, sor."

"No," said Frank, resolutely. "I will go myself."

The brave Celt could say no more.

He knew better than to attempt to gainsay his master, and Frank made preparations for the search.

Of course there was the likelihood that the cave was yet in the possession of the brigands.

In this case it would be perilous indeed to invade it.

Also, if the pit into which Harding and Pomp had fallen was connected with the main cave, their position would be a hazardous one as well.

Barney had instructions in black and white.

This was to elevate the Kite to the height of a hundred feet, and there to hold it anchored.

The Celt did as he was told.

Then Frank, armed to the teeth, descended over the cliff into the defile.

He saw nothing of the brigands, and came to the conclusion that they had deserted the place.

This was a gratifying reflection, and he kept on with confidence.

He reached the mouth of the cavern in safety.

There was no sign of the brigands anywhere.

Frank now took his bearings carefully, with the idea of locating the possible connection of the pit with the cavern.

Then he entered the latter, and pushed on confidently from one passage to another.

For a long time he kept on thus.

At times he would pause and listen for some sound or sign of the missing men.

But always there remained the same dead and awful silence.

It was like being in a tomb, and was by no means agreeable to Frank.

"I certainly hope I shall soon come across them," he reflected. "There is a possibility of getting a bad chill in this damp and loathsome place."

But time passed on, and he felt sure that he must have reached the part of the cavern directly under the pit's mouth.

But it was not until he had burned two torches and lit a third that he hit upon a clew.

Then suddenly a glistening object in the dirt caught his eye.

Instantly he picked it up.

It was a hunting knife with a bright silver handle, and he knew that it had belonged to Harding.

Frank flashed the rays of his torch to the roof above.

And there he saw a circular opening which he knew was the end of the pit into which the two men had fallen.

Barney's ingenious hypothesis was correct, after all.

But where were the men?

Frank asked himself this question.

He examined the soft soil of the cave.

There were their footprints surely. They led away into a side passage, and Frank followed them.

He raised his voice and shouted repeatedly.

But the only answer that came back was a strange, weird echo, which repeated itself many times.

By the light of the torch Frank followed the trail.

In this manner he might in time have overtaken them.

But suddenly the trail came to an end. This was owing to a peculiar change in the soil.

The soft dirt was supplanted by gravel and ashes, and no footprint could be visible in them.

This was a great disappointment to the young inventor.

He shouted loudly again and again. But the two men were evidently far beyond hearing.

Frank kept on for some while in the hope of striking the trail again.

But in this he failed.

And now he was confronted with a startling fact.

This was that he was himself lost. He had not the slightest idea as to the direction to take to carry him out of the cave.

He wandered on and on for what seemed an eternity.

In vain he tried passage after passage.

The cavern was a veritable labyrinth. The more earnestly he tried to find his way out the deeper he got into the tangle.

Finally horror and despair began to settle down upon the young inventor.

"My God! Am I to perish in this place?" he muttered dismally. "Is there no way out of it?"

Indeed this did not seem possible.

So deep was the maze of passages that there was no doubt that Frank had in many cases returned again and again to the point from which he started.

At length a dreadful weariness and faintness began to settle down upon the young inventor.

He could not seem to overcome it, and finally, completely fatigued, he yielded to nature, and sinking down upon the soft dirt, he slept.

How long he slept he never knew.

When he woke up the torch by his side was naught but a heap of cold ashes.

But fortunately Frank had provided himself with a good supply of these.

Lighting another, he thrust it into a niche in the wall.

Then he sat up and rubbed the numbness from his stiffened limbs. Very soon he felt better.

But the outlook was certainly a very dismal one.

He felt weak and faint. Fortunately Frank had a small flask of brandy in his pocket.

A draught from this revived him for a time, and he was enabled to go on once more.

Again he wandered on through the labyrinth.

Of course chance might at any time bring him out of the maze, but he was not altogether hopeful. The heaviness of the air had a most depressing effect upon him, and made him feel weak and sick.

Finally Frank came to a stop.

He began to appeal to his inventive genius. This seldom failed him.

"Here I have been going on at random," he declared "making a fool of myself; and at this rate I would soon succumb to exhaustion. Now by some system I can certainly find my way out of this place."

If he had taken the precaution to blaze the walls upon entering all of this trouble might have been averted.

But Frank was not to be long baffled by a problem.

He had been accustomed to solving such all his life, and he believed that he was able to do it now.

He went to work carefully with his pocket compass to locate his position.

He remembered that the mouth of the cave faced due east.

By keeping to every passage that led in that direction it certainly seemed as if he ought to get out eventually.

Frank happily had a piece of chalk in his pocket.

This he employed in carefully marking numbers upon the wall of every passage into which he turned.

Some of the passages leading eastward would come to a termination in a most exasperating manner after having been followed for a long way.

Others would turn back upon themselves or wind again into the maze.

In this case Frank would be compelled to return to the point of beginning.

Then he would begin over again and take another passage.

In this way he worked his way along with perseverance and good courage.

By his system of marking the false passages Frank was enabled to finally find a continuous passage to the eastward.

A gleam of daylight showed ahead.

Ten minutes' run and he came into a lofty roofed cavern chamber in which all was daylight from an aperture above.

He recognized it as the treasure chamber. With a cry of joy he went on and soon came out into the defile once more.

It had seemed eternity, yet really Frank had been lost two days and nights in the depths of the Andean caverns.

CHAPTER VII.

ADVENTURES UNDERGROUND.

But what was really the fate of the two men, Harding and Pomp, who had fallen into the pit?

When Harding had plunged into the jungle, he had not stopped to think where his footsteps were leading him.

His sole thought was to distance his pursuers.

He was more than delighted to think that he had been able to do this.

The ruse suggested by Frank Reade, Jr., had succeeded beyond his most sanguine expectations.

"If I can only find a hiding place about here," he muttered, "I shall be sure to give them a permanent slip."

So he rushed on, and gave no heed to the nature of the ground under his feet.

Then he stepped unsuspectingly upon what seemed like a mere network of vines.

But it masked a trap; for he felt the earth give way under his feet, and he went down like a shot.

His hands were tied, else it was possible that he might have saved himself by clutching something in his descent.

As it was, he was jolted and jarred into half insensibility by contact with the winding walls of the passage.

Down, down he went, and experienced a shock, and for a moment was partly insensible.

When he recovered himself he was in pitchy darkness. The air about him was damp and foul.

He was sore and lame from the effects of his fall.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Where am I, and what has happened?"

Then he remembered that he had fallen into a hole in the ground.

The rest was blank.

For aught he knew he might be at the center of the earth. In vain he tried to collect his scattered senses.

And thus he was engaged when suddenly he heard a sliding, scraping motion above him, and a voice suddenly cry out in alarm:

"Hol' on up dar, Marse Frank! I done believe dat rope am a breakin'!"

Then there was a snapping sound, a yell of terror and a thud, and he felt a cloud of dust in his face, and knew that some person lay beside him.

It was Pomp.

Harding could not fail to recognize the voice, and cried: "Heavens! Is that you, Pomp?"

"Golly fo glory, Marse Harding, am dat yo'sef?"

"It is," replied Harding, eagerly. "How on earth did you come down here?"

"Bress yo' haht, honey, I jes' cum down fo' yo'," replied Pomp.

"You did?"

"Spec's I did, chile!"

"Well, you have found me."

"I should say so, sah, an' done break mah neck in de bargain. But howebber is we uns gwine fo' to git up dar agin, I dunno."

"How did you come down?"

"On a rope, chile; an' it done break wif me!"

"Then you tracked me?" asked Harding, eagerly.

"Spec's we did, sah."

"And Frank Reade, Jr., he escaped also?"

"He am up dar dis bressed minut, an' I don' fink I bettah tole him about dat rope breakin' wif me!"

"Good!" cried Harding; "tell him to lower it more!"

"Yo kin bet I will."

With which Pomp endeavored to shout to Frank and Barney above, but the result is well known.

They were unable to hear or make themselves heard, and finally Pomp abandoned the idea in despair.

They were in total darkness.

Their position did not seem by any means encouraging.

Pomp's coming, however, was in many ways a blessing to Harding.

The darky was enabled to cut the bonds which held his wrists, and set him free.

They quickly compared notes.

It was a conclusion that they were in the depths of a cavern, most likely connected with the treasure cave.

"In that case," said Harding, hopefully, "why should we not try to at once find our way out?"

"Of cose," agreed Pomp; "dat am de bery first ting."

With this resolution they set out.

For hours they wandered through the mazes of the cavern labyrinth.

In one respect their quest was a more difficult one than Frank Reade, Jr.'s, for they had no torches to light their way.

They were obliged to make their way along by the sense of touch.

Indeed less brave and hardy spirits would have been appalled with the force of the situation in its hopelessness.

But they kept on resolutely, and this very energy proved their salvation.

By what was a fortunate chance they succeeded very quickly in striking a passage which led out of the labyrinth.

But this was on the opposite side of the mountain, and as they came out into the sunlight they were for a moment dazzled.

But as this cleared away they saw that they were upon a shelf of rock in the mouth of a cavern which overlooked a great stretch of country.

Far below was a long and narrow valley between the Andean peaks, and through this ran a stream.

Harding gazed upon the scene a moment and exclaimed:

"Well, Pomp, we may thank our lucky stars that we are out of the woods at last!"

"You's right dar, Marse Harding," declared the darky.

"But it will now become necessary to find out the location of the air-ship."

"Yes, sah."

"I should say that we were upon the exactly opposite side of the mountain."

"Dat am a fac', sah."

"Well, how are we to get down from here?"

Harding went to the edge of the shelf of rock and looked down.

The view was not an encouraging one. A deep descent it was, and to make it one would have to exercise great care.

There were clinging vines on the face of the cliff.

Harding tested these, and found them firm and strong.

He swung himself over the edge.

"Are you a good climber, Pomp?" he cried. "If so, you may follow me."

"A'right, sah," said the darky.

He swung himself over after the gold seeker. In this manner both made their way down the face of the cliff.

After a time they reached the valley below.

The question now was how were they to find their way back over the mountain to the spot where Pomp had left the air-ship.

But this question seemed to find a certain solution. There was a pass between the peaks which seemed to lead to the eastward.

It was believed that by taking this the distance could be overcome quickly, and the party once more united.

There did not seem to be any danger of meeting Red Muriel, though such an incident would be most unpleasant.

What had become of the brigand chief it was impossible to guess.

It might be that he had fled from the region with the Incas treasure, which he had stolen from Harding.

The latter had not abandoned the hope of regaining the lost treasure.

Just how this was to be accomplished was not yet quite clear to him. But he had hopes that it would be done.

Harding and Pomp pushed on through the grass.

They had nearly reached its termination when a thrilling incident occurred.

Pomp was in advance, and came to what in the shadows looked like a huge log across the path.

He was about to step over it when quick as a flash it rolled itself in hideous coils about him.

It was a monster python of the most wonderful species. Pomp was but a child in the folds of the monster.

A wild yell escaped the darky's lips.

"Golly—golly!" he cried, in agonized accents. "Marse Harding, dis chile am done gwine fo' to be killed. Lor' sabe mah soul!"

Harding was horrified beyond expression.

For a moment he was riveted to the spot in helpless horror. The sight of the monster snake was to him most terrifying.

He saw that the monster's folds were tightening about Pomp, and that he was likely to be killed in quick order.

A frenzy seized Harding.

"I will save you, Pomp," he cried, desperately. "Don't give up hope."

Then drawing a huge sheath knife he rushed upon the snake.

He made a blow at the monster's head.

He missed it, but drew a tremendous spurt of blood from the snake's body. Again and again Harding slashed at the reptile's body.

He believed that if he could sever the mighty coil he could save Pomp's life.

In this he was right. The darky struggled, but his efforts were those of a child in that powerful grip.

The snake made repeated blows at Harding with its head.

But the plucky gold seeker dodged them every time and kept at work with the knife.

Such strenuous efforts could not fail to yield some result. Gradually the snake's coils began to weaken, and finally Pomp was enabled to crawl from them altogether.

The reptile rolled upon the ground in savage agony, writhing and twisting violently.

Harding was overjoyed at his success in rescuing Pomp, and both made haste to attain a safe distance from the reptile.

"Golly, but I done fought I was a gone coon dat time!" cried Pomp, with dilated eyes. "I jes' fink I owes mah life o yo', Marse Harding."

"We were fortunate to be able to dispose of the monster!" said Harding, modestly. "But come, Pomp, let us get out of this infernal region."

"A'right, sah," agreed Pomp. "I'se more dan agreeable, sah."

With this they once more set out through the defile.

After much hard climbing they finally succeeded in crossing the mountain ridge, and suddenly a great cry burst from Pomp's lips.

"Mah goodness!" he cried; "does yo' see dat, Marse Harding?"

There, not many miles distant, they saw the Kite anchored in midair, not more than a thousand feet above the earth.

Both now pressed forward eagerly.

It seemed an interminable distance to the air-ship, but they kept on.

Meanwhile, a curious change had been going on in the atmosphere.

The sky was assuming a strange copper color, and to the west and south there was a long, livid line on the horizon.

The two adventurers were too intent upon the object before them to note this.

They kept on at full speed, and suddenly Pomp cried:

"Dar am some one on de deck, an' dey am jes' makin' a signal to us."

At that distance it looked very much like Barney.

This was the truth.

It was evident that the Celt had seen them. With renewed courage the two adventurers pressed on.

Barney had seen them, and as they answered his signals, he allowed the air-ship to descend as rapidly as possible.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TERRIBLE STORM.

After a hard climb the two adventurers finally succeeded in reaching the air-ship.

As they approached Barney stood at the rail and hailed them.

"Be me sowl! I'm glad to see yez!" he cried; "but phwere on earth did yez come from, anyhow?"

"Golly!" cried Pomp, rushing up and embracing his friend; "I'm jes' so glad fo' to see yo', I'ish, dat I cain't git over it."

"Let up wid yer love-makin', an' give us some dacint explanation of yure conduct!" cried Barney, with much dignity.

"Yo' ought to know 'bout dat yo'se'f, I'ish. Didn't yo' see me fall down in dat hole in de ground?"

"Begorra, I did, an' phweriver did it go to, anyway?"

"It jes' carried me down into a big cave, whar I found Marse Harding, an' we managed to fin' our way out aftah a long time, chile. Dat am de way ob it."

"Bejabbers, that's quare enough. But shure, didn't yez see Misther Frank?"

Harding and Pomp looked amazed.

"Marse Frank!" exclaimed the darky. "Wha' yo' talkin' about, chile?"

"Bjabbers, can't yez undherstand?" roared Barney. "Misther Frank went aftther yez to thry and find yez, begob."

"Didn't see nuffin' 'tall ob him," replied Pomp, vaguely. "Which way did he go?"

Harding was interested.

"Did Frank go out to look for us, Barney?" he asked.

"He did that, sor."

"But was he not with Pomp at the pit?"

"He was that, with me, but sez he, 'I belave I kin foind thim two min by just goin' into the cave agin an' makin' a search for them there!'"

"Oh!" cried Harding, with comprehension. "I see. Frank believed that the pit led down into the cave!"

"That's it, sor."

"And he has gone into the cave to look for us?"

"Yis, sor."

"Oh, that's all right!" cried the young gold seeker, with a breath of relief; "then we had better simply remain here until he returns. But—there is a possibility that he may get lost in the cave."

"Huh! Don' yo' believe dat, chile. If we could fin' our way out ob dat place, yo' kin jes' bet dat Marse Frank could do de same."

"Begorra, an' that's throe enough," agreed Barney.

"Well, then, all we can do is to wait here for his return!" said Harding.

"Av coorse it is."

"I reckon dat am de bes' way."

This settled matters.

All now started to go on board the Kite. Harding had put his hand on the rail when there was a series of sharp reports, and bullets went whistling past.

Astounded, the adventurers turned to behold a thrilling sight.

There, rushing across the bluff, was a large number of the Peruvian brigands.

They were yelling fiendishly and brandishing their weapons.

"Bejabbers, here comes the inemy!" cried Barney, in wild excitement.

"Golly, I done fink we bettah run fo' our lives!" yelled Pomp.

"Aboard, both of you!" cried Harding, who had reached the deck. "For your lives!"

But there was little need of the admonition.

The two faithful servitors were aboard the Kite in a twinkling.

All rushed into the cabin.

Pomp and Barney picked up their rifles and gave the brigands a shot. But Harding, who was much excited, cried:

"Oh, that will never do! They will be upon us in another moment. Once they get on board the ship we are lost!"

"Huh! dey will nebber do dat!" cried Pomp. "Not if dis chile knows it."

The darky with this rushed into the pilot-house.

It was but a moment's work to press the key and the air-ship shot up into space.

The baffled brigands gathered below upon the spot where the Kite had been.

They seemed to view the ascension of the air-ship with a profound astonishment and mystification.

"Begorra, they don't know phwat to make av it, do they?" cried Barney, with a laugh.

Harding held up a shot-riddled hat.

"This is how narrow my escape was!" he declared. "A inch nearer and my career would have been closed."

"It's glad I am, sor, that it was not," said Barney.

"Dat am jes' so," declared Pomp.

"Thank you," said the gold seeker, with a thrill of pleasure. "Your kind words are gratifying."

But so intent had they been on watching the brigands below that they had failed to note a more serious calamity which now threatened them.

All this while the copper hue had been increasing in the sky.

The livid hue upon the horizon had deepened, and a gust of wind, with a mournful sough and wail, swept across the country.

The sun was in a yellow mist, and a dark shadow was beginning to creep over the land.

Harding was the first to note this.

A sharp, startled cry escaped his lips.

"My God!" he cried. "It is a storm coming and such thing in the tropics is no light affair."

Pomp and Barney saw the danger as well.

"A storm!" cried Barney. "Begorra, it lukes to me loike a hurrycane!"

"I jes' fink we bettah get out ob dis place!" cried Pomp. This was true.

But where should they go?

The brigands were below. It would hardly be safe to descend. To remain where they were would be to expose themselves to the fury of the storm.

It was a dilemma.

But there was no time in which to make a decision.

Even while they were thinking about it there came a terrific gust of wind, which sent the Kite nigh over on her beam ends, so to speak.

"Heavens!" cried Harding; "this will never do. Lower the ship, Barney."

The Celt saw that this was likely their only salvation.

He sprang to the pilot-house.

Pomp and Harding followed.

But they had barely time to shut the door when the storm burst. What followed was ever after to them like chaos.

The Kite seemed to be whirling and tumbling over and over in space.

Every movable article aboard was tossed hither and thither.

As for the occupants, one moment they were upon their heads, and the next moment upon their feet, or rolling about like a football.

It was evident that the Kite was speeding through space with awful velocity.

Where this sort of thing would end up the voyagers did not know.

They expected that at any moment the Kite would be disesteemed of her rigging, dashed to the ground, and that they all would be killed.

But this did not happen.

The very fact of the air-ship's complete helplessness in the vortex of the tornado saved her.

The rotascopes were revolving like a whirlwind.

Unknown to the voyagers the shock had thrown the ratchet of the lever open, and the full force of the current was on.

Every lull in the force of the wind gave the air-ship a chance to shoot upward.

Up she went like a rocket, higher and higher.

She attained a tremendous elevation from the earth, as the passengers now began to discover by reason of the change of temperature.

The air became chill, and as cutting as a knife.

Frost instantly began to appear upon the glass windows and the ironwork of the air-ship.

The wind was less furious now, and the Kite was going more steady.

Barney and Pomp at once understood the change.

The Celt sprang up and cried:

"Whurroo! It's saved we are if we don't freeze to death.

Shure, the storm is all below us this blessed moment!"

"What do you mean?" cried Harding; "have we really risen above the storm?"

"That we have, sor."

"But—is it not dangerous at this frightful altitude?"

Harding shivered with horror as he reflected that they might be several miles from the earth.

Indeed it was not a cheerful reflection for one with unsteady nerves.

But Barney laughed.

"Yez need have no fears at all, at all, sor!" he cried.

Shure we'll get back to the earth all safe!"

The Kite was now steady as a clock.

A strong gale was blowing, and snow was flying about the deck.

But it was evident that she was far above the storm and that the danger would very soon be past.

Barney pulled out some thick overcoats, which all donned.

Indeed the cold was very painful.

Looking out through the pilot-house window Barney was able to see that the damage to the Kite was not of any great consequence.

The steel bracing irons of the rotascope shaft were bent, the blade of one rotascope was twisted, and the deck had been cleared of everything portable upon it.

Fortunately, this was only in the shape of a few chains of no great value.

Certainly there was good reason for warm congratulations.

The escape had been a narrow one. It was a living wonder that the air-ship had not been wrecked.

The cold was intense, and the voyagers were kept busy rubbing their hands and stamping their feet.

But it was better by far to endure than to risk contact again with the tornado.

Gradually the storm subsided, the yellow light began to fade, the Kite hung motionless in the heavens, and Barney cried:

"Shure an' I kin see the garth below. The storm is all over."

"Heaven be praised!" cried Harding, eagerly. "We must return at once to the spot where we left Frank Reade, Jr."

"Bejabers, we will, if we kin iver foind it!" cried Barney.

"What!" cried Harding; "do you think there is any doubt about that?"

"Shure, sor, an' I dunno."

"How far do you think we have been carried by the gale?"

"Mebbe a hundred miles, and perhaps more, sor."

"Impossible!" cried Harding, in dismay. "You don't mean that."

"It is near roight, sor!" declared Barney. "We were traveling moighty fast."

"You are right there. Well, we have no time to lose, then, in returning to Frank Reade, Jr. But let us first find out where we are."

"That's right, sor!"

But Barney glanced over the rail and gave a cry of surprise. Then he glanced up at the rotascopes.

"Phwy, that's queer!" he muttered. "Shure, we're fallin' to the earth now!"

He rushed into the engine-room and at a glance saw the truth. The storm had disarranged a part of the electrical machinery and the Kite was falling with frightful rapidity.

Barney saw that the break was beyond quick repair, and cried:

"Och, hone, it's kilt we'll all be. Shure, the air-ship is fallin' as fast as iver it can!"

CHAPTER IX.

FRANK HAS AN INTERVIEW.

Frank Reade Jr., felt much as the prisoner of the Bastille must have, when he saw the light of day once more, after having felt the assurance that he was doomed to death in prison.

The young inventor drank in the clear air, and in an instant was refreshed.

"Heaven be praised!" he murmured. "My life is spared. Now to find the Kite."

He made his way to the path over the face of the cliff.

Following it, he was soon upon the height above.

But there was no sign of the Kite visible anywhere.

The air-ship was gone.

The young inventor for a moment experienced a chill. This was intensified into awful horror as he looked about him.

"My soul!" he exclaimed. "There has been a terrible storm, and— Great God! Can it be that the Kite has been destroyed?"

This question was one not to be easily answered.

The upturned earth, fallen trees, and scenes of wreck and violence was evidence that the storm had been a terrible one.

Certainly it looked not at all improbable that the Kite had been dashed to pieces by the fury of the tornado.

"My God!" cried Frank, in despair. "This is the worst fatality yet."

Then he reflected that he must have been a greater length of time in the cavern than he had reckoned upon.

What was to be done?

How was he to find the air-ship or to learn its fate? The problem was a mighty one to consider.

But as he was pondering upon it in a dismayed way, Frank was given a start of surprise.

From his position he could see the defile below.

He was amazed to see a band of horsemen threading their way out into the valley.

He saw at a glance that they were brigands.

Red Muriel rode at their head.

At once Frank's curiosity was aroused.

Where were the villains going and what were they up to? He was determined to know.

What the fate of the air-ship and the others was Frank did not know, but he lived in the hope that the Kite had outrode the storm and would yet return all safe.

For the nonce the best thing he could do was to follow

the brigands and, if possible, learn what disposition they had made of the Incas' treasure.

So Frank crept cautiously along the edge of the cliff.

He waited until the brigands had turned from the defile into the valley, then he crept down in their rear.

They rode slowly, and it was not difficult for him to keep up with them.

For several miles across the valley he followed them.

Darkness was fast coming on and Frank concluded that the gang were going to their headquarters.

This was a gratifying reflection.

He was more than anxious to learn the location of this.

So intent did he become in following the villains that he forgot all else.

At length they entered a circuitous path among jagged masses of rock, and which led steadily upward.

For a mile this was continued.

Not until the peaks were about them and they were fairly among the clouds did the robbers come to a stop.

Then a deep chasm was reached, across which was one of those peculiar rope bridges seen nowhere else in the world.

This did not seem safe to cross.

Yet the sure-footed ponies, one by one, crossed the swaying bridge and passed safely to the other side.

Frank waited until all had passed over.

He saw upon a wide plateau beyond the peaks a number of log cabins thatched with palms.

He concluded at once, and correctly, that this was the stronghold of the brigands.

Frank was too cautious to venture to cross the bridge as yet.

This would certainly have exposed his presence to the brigands.

But darkness was fast coming on, and he would have a better opportunity to carry his point.

So the young inventor secreted himself in a clump of bushes near.

He watched the opposite side of the gorge, and while doing so was given a thrilling surprise.

From the growth of palms there stepped forth suddenly and stood revealed upon the wall of the chasm a beautiful vision of female loveliness.

This was a young girl, as fair and slender as a dream.

But her dress was not of the Spanish type, nor were her features. There was no mistaking the fact that she was American.

Frank Reade, Jr., was so astonished that for a moment he knew not what to do or say.

He watched her intently.

Despite the shadows the distance was not so great but that

could see plainly the expression of pain upon her face. Frank crept close to the verge of the chasm. He felt like speaking to her, but refrained from some time.

The distance between himself and the fair prisoner, for whom he judged her to be, was not more than thirty feet. A whisper can almost be heard at this distance, as is well known.

For several moments the girl prisoner stood there inactive. Then suddenly she began to sing in a low, sweet, thrilling voice.

It was a love ballad, the song of a broken heart. The melody was divine, and the singer's words were so intense and pathetic that Frank's whole sympathies went out to her.

He could not refrain from saying in a low, distinct voice, when she had finished:

"Have courage! A friend is near you!"

A sharp, startled exclamation escaped the singer's lips, as she looked about her like one awakened from a dream.

"What was that?" she exclaimed. "I thought I heard a voice in my native tongue."

"You heard aright," said Frank. "Am I right in addressing you? Are you not a prisoner?"

"I am," replied the young girl, with an eager cry. "But are you?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr."

"You are an American?"

"Yes."

"Heaven be praised! And have you come to save me?"

"I will, if it is in my power."

"A thousand thanks."

"But who are you, and how came you in captivity?" asked Frank.

The young girl drew a deep sigh.

"Ah!" she said; "it will no doubt sound to you like a romance; but I came to this country to look for the man I love."

Frank was astounded.

"I don't understand you," he said.

"I will be more explicit. My name is Mabel Dane, and I came from New York. I came here——"

A sharp cry escaped Frank's lips.

"You are looking for Royal Harding?" he said.

"Yes!" she replied, excitedly. "Can you tell me of him?"

"I can."

"Thank God for that! Where is he now?"

"That I cannot say, but I hope alive and well," replied Frank. "He was with me until very recently."

"I am so glad to know that he is then alive!" said Mabel Dane, "for I heard that he was sick with a fever in this desolate clime, and I came all the way from New York to find him, and to nurse him back to life and happiness."

"He has not forgotten you," said Frank. "Indeed, he had hoped to return to you with his fortune made. It was his by right of discovery, but this brigand villain Muriel has stolen it away."

"Ah, poor fellow!" cried she; "but he shall worry no more about the fortune. I am rich now in my own right. Shortly after Royal went away to look for his fortune, my father got word from his brother in Australia that an uncle had died and left them a round million each. I was anxious to go in quest of Royal at once. Hearing that he was sick, father and I came here in search of him."

"We journeyed on negro-back and on mules, on foot and every way, until in a mountain pass, not fifty miles from here, Red Muriel captured us and brought us here to be held for ransom."

"The villain!"

"He is that. Well, father has sent for the five thousand dollars required by the wretch, and we will soon be free."

"Red Muriel shall not have the ransom," cried Frank. "I will rescue you this very night. Is your father also a prisoner?"

"Oh, yes, and six of our guard of escort given us by the governor at Quito. But do you really think you can rescue us?"

"I know it."

"What are your plans?"

"As soon as it becomes dark," said Frank, "we will act. I shall creep across that bridge and——"

"Ah, but that bridge is drawn up at night. You cannot cross by any other means."

This was a staggerer to Frank.

"Drawn up!" he exclaimed. "You do not mean that?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I——"

But he never finished the sentence.

A mocking laugh sounded in his rear. Frank turned like a flash to see a dozen armed brigands back of him.

He was covered by as many carbines.

The young inventor's heart fell.

There was no use to offer resistance. He was wholly and hopelessly a prisoner. To surrender was his only move.

"You see, Senor Americano," cried Red Muriel himself, mockingly, "you cannot escape my vengeance. Before you worked a very clear game. But you shall not succeed this time."

It was certainly a most disheartening occurrence.

But Frank put a bold face on the matter.

"All right," he said, coolly, in Spanish; "I am your prisoner, Senor Muriel. I cannot resist as I would like to do."

In a twinkling his arms were bound behind him.

The game was up.

His plan to rescue Mabel Dane and her father was set at naught. The brigands led him across the rope bridge, and he was cast into a leaking and vile smelling hut for the night.

Frank's sensations were not of the pleasantest. But he bore up bravely.

But the next morning he was led from his prison house by an armed guard.

He was placed with his back to a tall palm tree, and an armed guard at fifty paces covered him with their carbines.

Red Muriel stood by with a cruel smile upon his dark face.

"This time, senor," he said, derisively and vengefully, "no power on earth shall save you. The last time you were lucky enough to make your escape. But this time you die!"

CHAPTER X.

A DRAMATIC MEETING.

The sensations of those on board the Kite when they found that it was falling to the earth with great rapidity can hardly be imagined.

A million things flashed through their minds in a second of time.

It does not require a great while for a heavy body like the Kite to fall several miles through the air.

If the air-ship should strike the ground at that pace it would be demolished, and all on board would be killed.

But even as the cry of despair escaped Barney's lips he made action.

He saw that the lever for the forward rotascope was not open, and the rotascope was not working.

Of course this rotascope alone could not support the air-ship.

But it would check its rapid downward flight and enable the air-ship to settle down easily.

Barney quick as a flash threw open the lever.

In an instant the downward rate of speed was checked.

The Kite continued to sink, but at a much slower rate of speed.

Barney's quick thought had saved the lives of all on board.

Slowly now the Kite began to settle toward the earth.

Barney quickly examined the electrical machinery.

"Is it serious, Barney?" asked Harding, anxiously.

"No, sor, I think not," replied the Celt. "But it take the whole of an hour's worruk to faix it."

Pomp had rushed to the rail outside to see where it would be likely to drop.

To the darky's joy he saw that it was upon land and water.

The air-ship was likely to settle down in the verge of a large forest and upon quite high land.

The peaks of the Andes were visible some miles away which showed that they had been driven quite a distance from the storm.

Without doubt they were fully one hundred miles from the cavern and the spot where Frank Reade, Jr., was.

Of course they realized the necessity of promptly repairing the air-ship and returning to the spot.

Slowly the Kite settled down.

Barney and Pomp brought out their tools and worked quickly to work.

Both were trained machinists, and Barney was a skilled electrician.

They were likely to as ably repair the Kite as it would have been possible to do under Frank Reade, Jr.'s personal supervision.

The Kite gently touched the ground, and Barney threw out an anchor.

There was no sign of an enemy in the vicinity, and they seemed safe. Therefore they did not hesitate to do this.

Harding busied himself about the ship's deck, clearing away the debris, and making things ship-shape once more.

So intent were the three voyagers in all this that they did not notice an occurrence which now threatened them with positive danger.

From the deep forest there suddenly emerged a train of donkeys, six in number, with four men.

These came to an astonished halt at sight of the air-ship.

They were of the gauchero type, with slashed trousers and broad-brimmed hats.

Most of them were possessed of the swarthy hue of a half-breed, part Spanish and part native.

But one of them, who seemed to be the leader, was possessed of a white skin.

He was plainly an American, though his face showed hardened lines, and his deep-set eyes burned with a sultry light.

The leader will recognize him at once as the treacherous partner of Royal Harding, and with whom the treasure-seeker had the hard battle on the cliff.

The treacherous villain had been to Quito and procured

a rascally guard of gauchos with which to return and recover the Incas' treasure.

These four were but the advance guard, and as they stood here regarding the Kite in amazement a score more of the desperadoes came into view.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exclaimed Lester Vane, in astonishment. "How did that ship ever come as far inland as this?"

The gaucho at his elbow touched his sombrero, and replied:

"Senor, it has come here in the air."

"In the air!" exclaimed Vane, in amazement. "What do you mean?"

"Just that, senor."

"Do you mean to say that it blew in here?"

"It can fly like a bird, senor. We saw it when it passed over Quito nigh six weeks ago."

"An air-ship!" exclaimed Vane.

"Si, senor."

"But ah! I remember now. There is a man in our country by the name of Reade who is the owner of an air-ship. It may be him."

"It is, senor; that is his name."

Vane was interested.

"Let's take a look at the ark," he said, pompously. "Maybe we can buy it of the fellow."

"I think not, senor."

"And why not?"

"He will not sell. The governor offered him a fortune for an air-ship like it and he declined."

"Well," said Vane, with a cunning smile, "what is to prevent our taking it, Gastrovez, if he will not sell? If we work our cards well we ought to be able to do it."

"I think not, senor," replied the gaucho. "He has some terrible bombs that will destroy a dozen men at once."

"That's all right," said Vane, with a curse. "I do not want to fight him. Simply make a strategic move."

"Si senor; it may be possible to do that."

"It is possible, and we can do it. Come on. Let's have a parley with him."

With this Vane began to approach the air-ship.

The gaucho band followed behind at a slow pace.

Vane was almost at the rail of the Kite before anybody on board saw him.

Then Harding, in coming out of the cabin, saw the rascally crew.

A sharp cry escaped his lips.

"Barney—Pomp!" he cried, excitedly. "On deck quick! The brigands are here!"

The way Barney and Pomp grasped their weapons and tumbled on deck was a caution to monkeys.

And just at this moment Harding came face to face with Vane.

The meeting was a tableau worthy of an artist.

Vane had believed his former friend and victim of the cliff dead at the bottom of the Andean gorge.

To see him here now upon the the air-ship's deck was like looking upon one brought back from the dead.

Vane stood like a livid statue for a moment.

"Royal Harding!" he finally gritted.

"Lester Vane!"

The two sworn foes faced each other like wild tigers about to battle.

"I thought you dead."

"God spared my life to overtake and defeat you."

"Then you—you escaped that day from the face of the cliff?"

"I did."

"Curses on my stupidity. I ought to have made sure of the job."

A scornful laugh rippled from Harding's set lips.

"That is what you ought to have done," he said; "but as you failed to do it, you must now stand punishment for your falseness."

"Punishment?"

"Yes; for I shall not let my wrongs go unavenged."

A crafty light shone in Vane's eyes.

"Come, I have no hard feelings against you," he said.

"Let us be friends."

Royal Harding shivered.

"I would as soon have the deadly python for a friend!" he said.

Vane's face darkened.

"Then you refuse to make up?"

"Do you think I am wholly devoid of sense, Lester Vane?" he said, in a cutting voice. "There can never be anything but hatred between you and I."

"As you say it, so let it be," said Vane, with a bitter laugh. "War to the teeth, if you will have it! I would like to speak with the owner of the air-ship."

"You cannot do that."

"Why?"

"He is not here."

"Where is he?"

"That is none of your business. He would have no desire of parleying with you if he was here."

"You are polite."

"Perhaps so. But I would like to ask you a question."

"I will be more gracious than you and listen to it."

"Have you been to Quito?"

"I have."

"Where are you going now?"

"I am going after the Incas' treasure," he said, coolly.

"Have you anything to say why I shall not?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"The Incas' treasure is gone!"

"How do you know?"

"I have been there."

A fearful curse broke from Vane's lips.

"Gone!" he thundered. "Who has dared to take it?"

"Red Muriel, the brigand."

"Red Muriel, eh? So he has dared to do that? How did he learn that it was there? Did you tell him? Look here, Harding, we must get it away from him. We must co-operate and we will divide. Is it a bargain?"

"Villain!" exclaimed Harding, contemptuously. "Do not compel me to refuse your audacious request again."

"Then you refuse?"

"It is idle to talk with you."

"Only consider. With that air-ship you could ferret out Muriel's den, and it would be no trick at all to drive him from it."

Harding turned to the cabin door.

The wily Vane, however, had only been talking to gain time.

The moment he had decided upon for action had arrived.

Quick as a flash he turned to his followers, and made a quick motion.

"Strike!" he cried. "Do not kill them, but capture them alive! Strike!"

With a yell the gauchero crew piled over the rail of the air-ship like human wolves.

CHAPTER XI.

OUTWITTING THE VILLAINS.

The attack was so sudden that Harding was taken off his guard.

He was instantly overpowered.

Barney let out a yell.

"Whurroo! Give it to the omadhouns! Blow 'em to pieces, naygur! If yez don't they will capture the air-ship!"

"Don' yo' fo'git dat dis chile will jes' do dat!" cried Pomp. "Hi, dar! Look out fo' dis coon!"

Then both discharged their Winchesters.

Two of the villains fell dead.

But the struggle now became close and hand to hand.

The two brave defenders were forced down the stairs, and the gauchos piled upon them.

They would have been killed in a twinkling, but the villain Vane rose above the fight:

"Don't kill 'em, boys! Capture 'em alive! I've got for 'em!"

So Barney and Pomp were overwhelmed wholly by weight of numbers.

Thrown down, they were quickly bound and helpless.

Harding groaned in despair.

"It is all my stupidity!" he cried. "I should not have palavered so long with the dirty crew!"

"Och hone! an' phwat will we iver do now?" bemoaned Barney. "Shure, the spalpeens have the best av us!"

"Massy sakes alibe!" wailed Pomp; "it was jes' an lucky day fo' us when de air-ship struck dat are storm."

As for Vane, he was elated.

Flushed with success, he came up to Harding's post and gave it a kick.

"Well," he cried, contemptuously, "the tables have turned, haven't they? This time I'm on top. Do you know why I spared the lives of all of you? That nigger Irishman are to show me how to work the machinery of this air-ship. Then I shall take you up a cool thousand feet and let you drop gently to the earth. Will not that be pleasant?"

"Villain!" groaned Harding, helplessly.

Vane now went to Barney and Pomp.

He pleaded and threatened in turn, but the two faithful servants were obdurate.

"The loikes av yez can't fool me!" declared Barney.

Then from Harding Vane learned that the machinery was out of kilter.

Vane offered to allow Barney and Pomp to go on with their work of repairing, but they declined.

Thus the day passed.

The next morning found the crew of the Kite just as obdurate.

Another day wore away thus. Another night came and the second morning. Then an idea occurred to Harding.

They were confined in one of the staterooms. Vane himself held the cabin, and only a few of the gauchos, who were dirty fellows, were allowed aboard.

"I will tell you, Barney," said the young American in undertone, "we don't seem to be gaining anything in this way. Can we not work a sharp scheme upon the villain?"

"Shure, sor, av yez kin tell me——"

"I think I can!"

"All roight, sor!"

"Suppose you tell Vane that you have thought well of his proposition, and upon certain conditions will come to his assistance?"

"Well, sor?"

"Repair the machinery and then tell him that the air-ship can only carry six people. That will be you and I and Pomp, with Vane and two of his men. You and Pomp can have your chance after we get up in the air, rush down and cut my bonds, and we will make a fight."

Barney's eyes sparkled.

"Shure, sor," he cried, "yez have hit the nail on the head, shure."

"Then you approve of the plan?"

"I do that, sor."

"All right."

A short while later Vane came into the stateroom.

Barney and Pomp affected exceedingly penitent attitudes.

The villain noted this and at once said:

"Well, are you fellows going to come to terms?"

"Shure, sor, it's av no use holding out any longer. If we desire, we will upon some conditions do as ye say."

"Good for you."

Barney's and Pomp's bonds were quickly cut and they at once went to work upon the machinery.

In a very short time they had the electrical engines working all right.

Then Barney said:

"Now, sir, it's all roight we are for the ascint."

"Good!" cried Vane, eagerly. "I will take a dozen men aboard and send the others overboard."

"No, sir," replied Barney, emphatically. "Yez can't do that!"

"Why?"

"The air-ship will only carry up six people, sor. That's all."

"Six!" said Vane, sharply.

Then he went to his men and conferred with them.

They rode away finally, all but two. These accompanied Vane on board the air-ship.

"Now," said the villain, producing a couple of revolvers, "treachery on the part of you rascals, or you die!"

The anchor was hauled in, and pressing the lever, the air-ship sprang into space.

Up—up she went like a meteor.

The two gauchos were for a moment terrified, and then became anxious to jump overboard.

But Vane's nerves were of steel, and he enjoyed the excitement mightily.

Up, up went the Kite until objects upon the earth looked like mere specks.

At this juncture Barney appeared to be in much distress in the engine-room.

A heavy iron bar lay across a part of the machinery.

It was wedged between two cogs in such a fashion that one man could not pull it out.

Barney had purposely placed the bar in this position.

It was between some disused cogs of an extra engine, but nobody but the two, Barney and Pomp, knew this.

It did not in any measure affect the working of the engines, but Barney's dodge was to pretend that it did.

"What's the matter with you?" cried Vane, as he appeared in the engine-room. "What's wrong?"

"Do yez see that bar, sor?" cried Barney.

"Yes."

"Well, sor, it has fallen into the machinery an' has been afther stoppin' it. Shure, we kin niver stop the Kite from goin' up av we don't get it out."

"You don't mean it! Can't you pull it out?"

"No, sor."

"What difference does it make?"

"Shure, sor, the air-ship will go all av the way up to the end of nowhere av we don't get it out."

The villain laughed.

"Shure, it's no laughin' matter," declared Barney. "Afther we get up far enough we'll all freeze to death."

Vane began to wrench upon the bar.

It would not yield.

Vane stepped to the door.

"Gaspo! Miguel!" he cried. "Come here, you dogs!"

The two gauchos came slinking into the engine-room. Vane put a hand upon the bar.

"Take hold of this with me, you rascals," he cried, "and pull it out."

The villains obeyed. All three lay back upon the bar.

It would have taken twenty men to have pulled it out.

Barney knew this, and stepped quickly to the keyboard.

It was a neat little trap which worked well. He pressed one of the electric keys.

The current from the dynamos shot into the cogs and thence into the bar instantly. The effect was thrilling.

The three villains clung to the bar yelling and writhing in pain. They were unable to let go.

Too late Vane saw the ruse, and fierce curses broke from his lips.

But Barney quickly put a stop to them. He shocked the villains into insensibility. All three hung limply from the bar.

Meanwhile Pomp had liberated Harding, and both came rushing into the engine-room.

"Bejabbers, I've got the three av thim!" cried Barney, triumphantly. "Shure, luck is wid us this trip."

It was but a moment's work to bind the three villains securely.

Then the question arose:

"What shall we do with them?"

The Kite was drifting over a vast lake many miles in extent, peopled with loathsome reptiles, alligators and snakes.

In the center of the lake was a small, barren island.

"Let us leave them down there," said Harding. "They may get ashore the best way they can."

Barney and Pomp were pleased with the plan, and the air-ship was allowed to descend. Just above the island it was brought to a stop.

CHAPTER XII.

RESCUE—THE TREASURE FOUND.

Then the rope ladder was put over and Barney descended. The bodies of the three villains were lowered by means of a rope.

Just as the last one was lowered they began to come to. Vane sprang to his feet. But Barney was far up the rope ladder.

The villain, overcome with horror, looked about him and saw what the game was.

"Oh, friends, for God's sake, do not leave me here!" he cried. "I am repentant. I will be your slave if you will only not leave me in this place!"

But Harding stood at the rail and laughed scornfully.

"This is a good and fitting place for you, Lester Vane!" he said. "May you enjoy it. You cannot say that I have not been as merciful as you, for I have spared your life."

Vane now lost his temper.

He broke forth in bitter maledictions and curses. There was not anything too vile and vulgar for him to say.

The Kite once more sailed skyward, and a course was set at once for the distant Andean peaks.

In a very short time they loomed up near at hand.

But it required many hours for the locality which they were in quest of to come into view.

Barney, who was on the lookout, however, suddenly gave a wild and startled cry.

"Och hone!" he cried. "Wud yez luk at the loikes av that? Shure, av it isn't Masther Frank, an' be me sowl he is about to be shot by a gang av the brigands. Help—help!"

wud yez cum here with an electhric bomb as quick as iver ye kin, Pomp!"

Pomp needed no second bidding.

The air-ship had floated over one of the peaks just in time to bring the whole thrilling scene to view.

It was at the very critical moment when Frank was stood up before the file of brigands to be shot.

The words of command were upon Red Muriel's lips when suddenly the air-ship burst into view.

Its appearance was first noted by one of the brigands who chanced to be looking up.

Muriel for a moment forgot himself, and stood looking at the air-ship in a speechless manner.

Then down from the air-ship's deck there came hurtling a small black object.

It struck the earth directly in the center of the brigand encampment.

There was a terrific explosion.

Earth and debris were flung into the air to a great height and fully a dozen of the brigands were killed.

The wretches seemed to forget all about Frank Reade, Jr., or anything else, and fled for their lives.

The brigands, Red Muriel with the rest, were fleeing for safety to the cover of a cavern near at hand.

But across the plateau there ran a slender, girlish form.

It was Mabel Dane.

"Mr. Reade, we are saved! Thank Heaven for that!"

"Amen!" cried Frank. "You will now be able to rejoice in the man you love."

With a quick movement she cut the young inventor's bonds.

Then she rushed to the door of one of the brigand's huts and burst it in.

The guard at the door had fled. Out came a tall, fine-looking man of elderly cast. He was Henry Dane, the father of the plucky young girl who had dared to invade the Andean wilds in quest of the man she loved.

Behind him came the six Peruvians who had been of the party, and who had been held as well for ransom.

The air-ship, however, was now settling down fast, and in a very few moments it rested upon the plateau.

Harding was the first to leap over the rail, and greeted Frank Reade, Jr.

Then he beheld a vision which nigh took his breath away.

"My God!" he exclaimed; "am I dreaming, or is it my Mabel?"

"You are not dreaming, Royal!" she cried, rapturously. "I have come all this distance to find you. They told me you were ill, and I came to you."

"My love! My own!" cried Harding, joyously, as he clasped her in his arms.

Mr. Dane was introduced to Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp, and many pleasant remarks were exchanged.

The brigands, however, had not abandoned the fight.

Retreating to a height above, they had opened fire upon their foes.

The six Peruvians who were in Mr. Dane's employ were given weapons, and began to return the fire.

While the battle was thus progressing in a desultory way conference was going held by the others.

But now the question to be considered was as to what move was best to make next.

Of course Harding was anxious to find the Incas' treasure.

"I would not spend further time in the search, Royal," said Mr. Dane. "I am rich now, and you shall go into business with me. I have not many years to live and the fortune will be yours and Mabel's."

"Mr. Dane," said Harding, firmly. "Mabel and I will not marry until I have carried out my original purpose and given her a home of my own making!"

"Bravo!" said the millionaire, heartily. "I admire your spirit, and if that is your purpose I will not dissuade you."

"If I can recover this treasure, which is mine by right of prior discovery, I do not see why I have not legally gained my ends."

It was decided to make a thorough search of the robbers' den.

But though some money and many valuable equipments were found, none of the treasure was recovered.

The best efforts of the searching party were baffled.

But Harding would not give up the quest.

"I will find it yet," he declared, resolutely.

But Frank stood outside the cavern, when he heard a voice in Spanish near him.

A man with his leg shattered by the explosion of the bomb was creeping up to him.

There was a beseeching expression upon the wounded brigand's face, and he cried:

"Oh, señor, help me, and I will tell you where the treasure is hidden."

"What?" exclaimed Frank, in amazement. "Do you mean that? Do you know where the treasure is hidden?"

"Si, señor, I do that."

"What can I do for you?"

"Help me to return to Quito that I may live a better life."

"Enough," said Frank. "I will accept your offer. You shall be taken to Quito in safety if you will disclose the hiding place of the Incas' treasure."

All were gathered about the wounded brigand now.

Harding was called, and was overjoyed at the information given him.

"Listen, señor," he said to the confessing brigand. "Not only shall you be taken safely to your native country, but I will give you enough of the treasure to enrich you."

The fellow's eyes sparkled.

"The Señor Americano is kind," he said. "I shall not forget it."

Then he cleared his throat.

"Do you see yonder pine?" he said. "Go to it, measure twenty paces to the westward, find a boulder, roll it aside, and you will see a flat stone set in the ground. Under that is the treasure buried."

A rush was made for the spot.

The brigand's story was found to be in every particular true.

Rolling aside the boulder the flat stone was found.

Upon lifting it a square chamber was revealed, in which was heaped the mighty treasure of the Incas. It was a most bewitching spectacle.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END.

All stood looking at the solid heap of gold.

"There is enough here to enrich us all," cried Harding, joyously. "The dream of my life is at last realized!"

The gold was taken from the pit and safely stored on board the air-ship.

Harding insisted on a fair division with Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp.

But the young inventor unwillingly accepted his share.

"I am not working for pay, Mr. Harding," he said. "I am assisting you with no other motive than that of friendly interest."

"I am aware of that, sir," said the young gold seeker; "but you must accept it as a token of my esteem."

Nobody was left out, not even the six Peruvians hired by Mr. Dane as a bodyguard or escort.

But the brigands were making things hot in the vicinity.

One of the Peruvian guards had been shot, and there was great danger that some one else would be hurt.

Frank Reade, Jr., set his lips tightly.

"I'll soon take the conceit out of those villains," he declared. "Wait here until I return."

Then he leaped on to the Kite's deck.

Barney went into the pilot-house, while Frank stationed himself at the rail with some bombs.

The Kite, like a huge bird, sailed up over the mountain wall.

Then Frank began throwing the bombs.

Into every open place and crevice in the cliffs he threw them. The din was terrific and the execution fearful.

The brigands were driven like sheep from their hiding places and scattered like chaff before the wind.

The battle was all over in thirty minutes.

Then the Kite returned, and Frank, unharmed, leaped from the deck once more.

"I don't believe they will trouble us again at once," he declared. "We are safe for the time, I think."

And he was right. Red Muriel did not return to the attack.

There was nothing further to keep them in the Andes, and particularly was Harding anxious to go.

"We have six men as guides," he declared. "We can go overland to Lima. It will not be so far as to Quito, and there or at Callao we can get a homebound steamer. Once I set foot on United States soil again I will not soon leave it."

"Same here," cried Mr. Dane; "but before we start we must thank Mr. Reade for his very kind services."

"It is nothing," said Frank, warmly. "But why do you travel overland?"

Mr. Dane looked astonished.

"There is no other way for us," he said.

"Yes, there is."

"What?"

"On board the air-ship."

"You do not mean it!" cried the millionaire, joyfully. "No, we will not infringe upon your generosity to such an extent."

"Indeed, it will be a pleasure to me to take you to the coast," said Frank.

"But you are not yet ready to leave the Andes?"

"Yes; I am. I have been here six weeks now, and that is enough. I am anxious to get back to Readestown, for I have a new invention which I desire to perfect."

"Mr. Reade," said Dane, warmly, "we can never repay you for your kindness to us. Yet I would ask one more favor of you."

"What is that?"

"That I may inspect your beautiful Readestown and inspect your wonderful works there."

"I shall be very happy to receive you," said Frank, "any of the company present."

Barney and Pomp got all the traps aboard, and now the Celt brought out his fiddle and the darky his banjo.

It had been arranged that the bodyguard of Peruvia should return overland after having been well rewarded.

Then the Kite set her course for the seaboard.

The beautiful day was at its close, and the party all sat upon the deck in supreme happiness, enjoying the balmy air.

It was not necessary to be on duty in the pilot-house for the wheel was lashed, and the speed of the rotascope and propeller gauged in an accurate manner.

So Barney and Pomp entertained the company with their unique selections on the fiddle and banjo.

Callao was reached in due time, and here Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp took leave of their passengers.

Mr. Dane, Mabel and Harding repeated their assurances of gratitude and pleasure, and the next morning a steamer took them on their homeward way.

The fate of Lester Vane was never known. None of the party ever saw him again.

Frank Reade, Jr., set the course of the Kite due northward over the States of Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua, Mexico, and finally the United States.

Readestown was finally reached. Then the Kite was stored away for possible future use. The six weeks' flight over the Andes was at an end. But Frank Reade, Jr., lost no time in at once perfecting a new and wonderful invention, of which we may read in a future number of the weekly, with which announcement we will write

THE END.

The next number (8) of the "Frank Reade Weekly" will contain another thrilling story, entitled "FRANK READE, JR.'S DEEP SEA DIVER, THE 'TORTOISE,' OR THE SEARCH FOR A SUNKEN ISLAND."

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